

NON-FICTION

Masud Rana: Super Spy of Transplant Fiction

MAHMUD RAHMAN

Yet another Bond movie has come out, this time a remake of Casino Royale. Ian Fleming is long dead, but his creation, the debonair James Bond, Agent 007, keeps popping up in a new face. Bond's grip on the male psyche is tenacious. And why not? He zips to exotic locales and outwits vicious enemies while fingering cool gadgets and bedding impossibly hot women.

But Bangladeshi teenagers are not entirely deprived of heroes with cachet like Bond. In cheap newsprint, for a fraction of the price of a ticket at Basundhara where their screen Casino Royale, Bangla readers can enter the world of our very own super spy. In flesh and blood a pukka Bangali, he scales mountains, harpoons criminals undersea, and brings to justice crime lords from Hong Kong to New York.

He is of course Masud Rana, Agent MR-9. For forty years he has appeared in novels written by Qazi Anwar Husain and published by his Sheba Prokashoni. The crowds swarming the Sheba stall at the Ekushey Book Fair confirm that Masud Rana still has a loyal following.

Each Rana paperback opens with these lines: "An untameable daredevil spy of Bangladesh Counter Intelligence. On secret missions he travels the globe. Varied is his life. Mysterious and strange are his movements. His heart, a beautiful mix of gentle and tough. Single. He attracts, but refuses to get snared. Wherever he encounters injustice, oppression, and wrong, he fights back. Every step he takes is shadowed by danger, fear, and the risk of death. Come, let us acquaint ourselves with this daring, always hip young man. In a flash, he will lift us out of the monotony of a mundane life to an awesome world of our dreams. You are invited. Thank you."

With the books selling at 32-62 Takas, undoubtedly among the cheapest fiction titles in Bangladesh, Sheba is still churning them out. Their 2007 catalogue lists 372 Rana titles. You can buy used copies at 10-15 Takas at footpath booksellers from Paltan to Nilkhet.

I discovered Masud Rana when I was fourteen. By then my classmates and I had devoured most of the Bond novels. We craved more of what Bond promised. One day a friend slipped me a Masud Rana. Once home, I read it cover-to-cover, going back to read some choice bits.

How did Rana appeal to me? Perhaps I

was secretly thrilled to share initials with Agent MR-9. Who knows, I might even have fancied myself as MR-10.

But there was a hitch. This was 1968, and back then, Rana worked for Pakistan Counter Intelligence. With the 6-point movement, I had become a Bangali nationalist and despised the Pakistani military. No doubt it helped that Rana mostly fought enemies abroad while his counterparts on the ground were scheming against our aspirations.

Rana had an edge over James Bond. Unlike Bond who seduced women in bikinis and skirts, Rana also disrobed women clad in sari, blouse, and chaya. Bond's women were exotic, but they didn't exist in my universe. For that matter, neither were any real-life sari-clad women within my reach, but teenage fantasies can't quite be explained by logic.

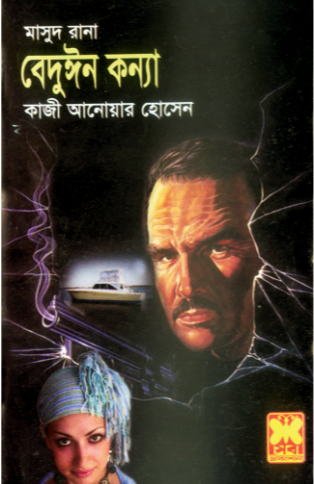
Soon came upheaval and such erotic visions had to take a back seat. I would be drawn to other kinds of books. And for decades, I didn't give a second thought to Masud Rana's fate. I even missed that in 1974, Dhaka released a Masud Rana film. The one and only, recently released on DVD by Laser Vision.

After years in the U.S., I'm home again, trudging the footpaths of Dhaka. One day on Mirpur Road, a lightning strike from the past jolts me. I come across a stack of Rana books. And I find that while many things have changed in Dhaka, Masud Rana remains in perfect health. Still fighting on. And while my hair's going grey, Rana has not aged a single year.

I pick up a few recent titles.

In the first, *Mrittuban* (Rana 359), the action is set in Bangkok, then Port Blair in the Andamans. Our hero saves India and China from being annihilated by Mr. X and his syndicate who have hijacked two nuclear bombs. This one reads like a traditional James Bond novel. It includes a woman named Trishna who's Mr. X's mistress but turns against him. Rana and Trishna inevitably fall in love, and the book ends with both of them in hospital. Beyond 'the end' there may be the promise of sex, but the lovemaking described in the book doesn't go beyond kisses.

In the second, *Bedouin Konya* (Rana 371), the story begins in London, then moves to Cyprus and an island off the coast of Israel. Here the wicked adversary is the Mossad. Rana has been fighting Mossad on behalf of the Muslim world from the time he



was with Pakistan CI. The 'Rana girl' in this novel is Suraiya who falls for Rana and then mysteriously disappears, emerging later in an unexpected twist. One time the two make love, but you get no juicy titbits.

I wonder if the lack of raciness in the writing reflects a more conservative mindset in the author. Of course I'm no longer fourteen, but I was ready to be taken back to that time. In these books, Rana somehow disappoints me. It's not so much that I miss him peeling off a beauty's sari, but despite forty years having gone by, Rana's world seems dated.

I think that what dismays me is that while Rana still flits around the globe, his own country is falling to pieces. Businessmen, politicians, and bureaucrats pile up empires of stolen wealth, godfathers terrorize villages and urban wards, yesterday's razakars sit in ministries, and Islamic terrorists set off bombs. I was eager to see Rana smoke out our own homegrown evil. Perhaps like others, Rana had to bide his time under the previous governments. Who knows, maybe now with a different regime in power, Rana will spearhead missions that will uncover something hotter than pilfered relief tin sheets.

That's my preference. Rana fans probably want him to take them to far-flung settings. The exotic has a strong hold on what we expect from our entertainment. But even so, there must be other readers like me who want to read of a tryst in a Dhaka hotel or a car chase through traffic jams between Karwan Bazaar and Uttara.

Then I crack open Masud Rana No. 322, *Abar Shorjontro*, published in 2002. The

plot opens with Iti, the sister of a dead multijoddha, meeting Rana in a secret rendezvous in a Shegun Bagicha restaurant. She sneaks in wearing a burka. She tells Rana that the company she works for, run by a Maulana Keramatullah, is doing something shady. Keramatullah turns out to be a razakar who became a dacoit, made tons of money, and is now a respectable businessman. Under the cover of an Islamic political party, he's mobilizing the Khadem Bahini, an army of fanatics poised to restore Pakistan.

He teams up with Khairul Kabir, a scientist living abroad who has designed an electromagnetic pulse weapon. Masud Rana's job is to foil the plot and save Bangladesh.

Now this is a Rana that stirs me. Never mind that there's not even a hint of steam. There's politics, social commentary, suspense, and location. The story set entirely in Dhaka, there's a car chase between Lalmatia and Motijheel, a break-in at a Banani multi-storey complex, an abduction in Gulshan, and the finale is in a godown in Tongi.

Bravo, Qazi Anwar Husain! Masud Rana isn't as behind the times as I'd feared.

Unlike most Masud Rana titles and other books by Sheba Prokashoni, the copyright page of *Abar Shorjontro* does not carry the standard line, *Bideshi kahinir obolombone*. Perhaps that means this one's a truly original story.

"This story follows a foreign plot" -- it's that disclaimer that makes many writers look down on the genre fiction published by Sheba. Besides Masud Rana, Sheba also publishes Westerns, suspense, horror, romance, and teenage adventures. They publish some abridged translations as well, but most of their titles would best be described as 'transplant fiction.'

Back in the 1960s I remember watching a Western film produced in Italy -- much later I came to know these were known as 'spaghetti westerns' -- and I kept thinking, I know this story, but from a different context. Then it hit me: the plot was based on The Count of Monte Cristo. To this day, Bollywood rolls out movies based on stories

from the Hollywood. Even an acclaimed movie like Black was based on a novel (and later an American film) about the Helen Keller story.

When I'm in a mood for light or timepass reading, I often choose genre fiction, mostly mysteries. Genre fiction seeks to entertain, and there's nothing shameful about that. Humans are hardwired to soak up drama. But even in that world, many writers aspire to something beyond fast-plot entertainment. Elmore Leonard is a master of dialogue. Walter Mosley's mysteries bring to life the story of the black community in post-WWII Los Angeles. Paco Ignacio Taibo II writes mysteries set in Mexico with a sarcastic voice relentlessly exposing corruption and social insanity.

As for borrowing from other writers, it too is often done. It's common in the world of theatre. Across languages and time, Shakespeare, Moliere, and Brecht have repeatedly been adapted. Even literary writers pay homage to novels they admire. Only last year, Zadie Smith published the delightful novel 'On Beauty'. She acknowledged that the novel followed the shape of Forster's 'Howard's End'. But Zadie Smith's novel was not transplant fiction. You might say a hazy x-ray of the skeleton of Forster's novel was in the back of her mind when she wrote out the words in her literary creation.

Sheba Prokashoni's goal seems to be to provide affordable and entertaining books in Bangla. They have clearly played a role in encouraging young people to read. Their writers show skill. Now this is my personal bias; I feel that skilled writers should reach with their pens. Most writers find it hard to make a living through writing, and it's no crime against art to do certain kinds of writing for money. Many have written pulp fiction to pay bills while working on more serious writing. I hope that those who write transplant fiction for Sheba have, at some point in their writing lives, devoted themselves to some ambitious writing.

Still, many of those who write transplant fiction are not mere copiers. They don't just take a story from England or the U.S. and loosely translate it, merely changing place and character names. There is expertise involved in adaptation.

Besides Qazi Anwar Husain, Sheba seems to have a small army of adapters. I checked out a romance set in Mymensingh and a suspense set in north Bengal. Sheba's authors only 'follow' a foreign tale. They have to take that borrowed plot and filter it through their Bangali characters. When they

transplant the original character from say, London, to a place in Bangladesh, they have to do something quite different than an organ transplant. They have to make sure that the local characters sound believable as Bangali and they're not just English men and women with local names. The act of cultural translation can be tricky. Sometimes it works. When it doesn't, a foreign detail sneaks through and it jars. When there's politics and social complexities involved, they need special care. Dialogue needs reproducing in local flavour, the writer then creating unique idiolects. For example, Masud Rana's old friend Guilty Miah speaks with his own Kolkataiya voice. Finally, while writing the book out, the author has to make sure that all elements come together with the final novel an integral whole, without limbs missing or sticking out.

That said, I would feel better if instead of just saying that this book follows a foreign tale, Sheba provided specific attribution. A writer somewhere worked hard to produce the original story, let that person get due credit. Thankfully, this tradition is strong in theatre.

Over the span of some forty years, Qazi Anwar Husain has written 371 Rana thrillers. Under his own name and the pen name Bidyut Mitra, he's also produced dozens of adventure books, self-help books, and the 25 Kuwasha titles that are now out of print.

Counting the Masud Rana series alone, that's a book every six weeks. All together, he must write a book every few weeks. Now that's quite a feat! For me, writing is hard work and it can take weeks, months, to hammer out a single short story.

So who's the real super hero here?

Masud Rana, the super spy who's make-believe, or his creator, the super writer who's very much flesh and blood?

For me, there isn't much doubt.

Mahmud Rahman is an American-Bangladeshi writer currently on an extended visit to Dhaka.

Talking with Razia Khan: "Those who write well, do it instinctively."



Razia Khan is a Bangladeshi poet, novelist, critic essayist and playwright who has been writing since the 1950s. She was a professor of English at Dhaka University, and generations of English literature students--some of whom went on to be teachers in the same department--have passed through her classes. Razia Khan showed promise at an early age, when she won the PEN Playwriting competition in 1956. Subsequently she won the Bangla Academy Award in 1975 and the Ekushey Padak in 1997. Razia Khan is widely known to readers as a poet and novelist in Bengali. Her notable works are *Bot-tolar Upanyas* (1959) *Anuulpa* (1959), *Protichitra* (1975) *Citra-kabya* (1980), *He Mahajiban* (1983), *Draupadi* (1992), *Padatik* (1996). She has written four volumes of Bengali poetry, as well as two English-language volumes, titled 'Argus Under Anesthesia' (1976), and 'Cruel April' (1977). While she has written poems in the original English, her English-language novels/works are translations, primarily by herself. Her English poems are highly allusive, in which an empathy for rural Bengal is discernable.

Here she exchanged a few thoughts with *The Daily Star's* staff member Ahmede Hussain.

Ahmede Hussain (AH): You have started writing at an early age; what prompted you to write? Razia Khan Amin (RKA): Inner image.

AH: You have not published a novel or a collection of poems for a long while, why is it so? RKA: The first volume of my complete works came out in 1995 with six novels. I am not in touch with publishers.

AH: As one of the forerunners of English writing in Bangladesh will you share your observations of the country's current English writing scene with us? RKA: Lita Samad, Rumana Siddique write well. I like the expository prose of Dr. Serajul Islam Chowdhury. Fakhru Alam's English translations of Jibonananda are adroit. Freedom Fighter Habibul Alam's English book on the Liberation War have a race, lucid style.

AH: We know that once people of this land fought valiantly to uphold their right to language, but at the same time, because most of the citizens do not know how to read and write Bengali as a language, it is fighting what many believe to be a losing battle. You write in both English and Bengali; how do you see the role of English in Bangladesh? RKA: English will one day play a role similar to that in India. Once we overcome our complexes, we will give it its rightful place as an international language. Our battle with illiteracy is not lost, nor our effort to establish the value of the mother tongue.

AH: Are you working on a new project now? RKA: I am shaping and giving last touches to the third segment of my trilogy. The first two have

been published - *Protichitra* (Mirrored Image), *Chitrokabho* (Portrait and Poetry). This one is called *Uposhanghar* (Epilogue). So far my publishers have not behaved well, cheating me right and left. I need an honest, judicious publisher.

AH: Do you believe Bangladeshi English-language poetry still has a long way to go, and if so, what are the reasons behind it? RKA: Those who write well, do it instinctively. Those who write because they are sought after turn wooden. Their work is not poetry. Compared to Indo-

Anglian poets our output is meagre because editors and publishers do not seek out the right people. The late S.N. Hashim wrote some outstanding English poems which have not come out. English dailies and magazines must focus on writers who have a flair for English and who write with imagination. Nadeem Rahman, a good poet, should be seen in magazines. I wrote a meticulous critique on his achievements which came out in *The Daily Star*, years ago. But when he politicizes his work it turns wooden. Many established Bengali poets, with the exception of Shamsur Rahman and Al Mahmud, have also lost their lustre. Spontaneity, feeling for poetry and its rhythm are important. The music in poetry has to be heard and then transmitted into words.

Ahmede Hussain's novella *Blues for Allah* was published in *Colloquy*, the Monash University literary journal.

Beautiful Trivandrum

It is not even A year since I was Among your fiery flowers; Call them Gulmohars Flame-of-the-Forest, Or what you will. Day and night My dalliance With their falling petals Was laughed at By the more wise Who with grim faces Around the conference table sat While I played And gathered The blushing buds Of the Cadena-de-amora Truly known in distant Spain As chains of love, With these I wretched my hair. The graceful, tapering leaves Of the lemon-scented ivory oleander I wore around my arm And thus beautiful Trivandrum Hidden in the deep South, Like myself, from the world's eyes Crowned me queen.



Draupadi Originally, this novel was written in Bengali, and the English translation was done by the author herself. The novel's principal characters are students at Dhaka University, two men and a woman, and the novel covers the time period from '50s East Pakistan to December 1971, with the locales shifting to Calcutta and London during 1971. Though the book offers glimpses of a Dhaka now irretrievably lost--small, uncrowded, and gracious--the not-quite-lucid translation makes the

Book ReviewSlack violin strings

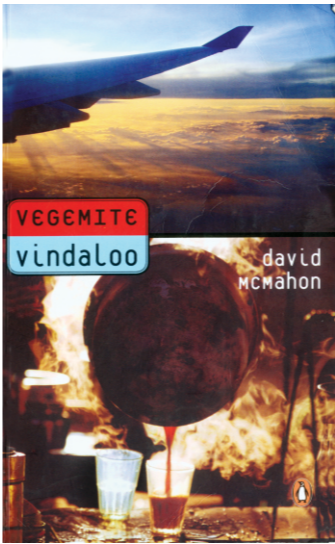
Isobel Shirlaw

Vegemite Vindaloo by David McMahon; Delhi: Penguin India; 2006; pp. 326; Rs. 295.

In *Vegemite Vindaloo*, David McMahon explores the concept of the homeland and what it means to be uprooted from all that is familiar.

Ismail Aziz is a lowly village tea-stall owner from the East Indian state of Bihar; he is an honest man but when his baby, Azam, falls ill, needing expensive medicine, stealing seems the only option available to him. But he is forced to flee the village of Bhowalpur when he starts to hear stories of the torturous treatment of thieves in police custody, taking Azam and his wife, Zarina, in search of a new, safe life in Kolkata.

McMahon's treatment of Bihari customs and of the lives of Ismail's family are sensitively observed but it seems that when he leaves Indian company, and



starts discussing the lives of a parallel family, the Coopers -- wealthy Anglo-Indians who also live in Kolkata -- the writing becomes a little sloppy. A Kolkata-born Anglo-Indian himself, there is a sense that McMahon is instantly more

comfortable writing about his own social domain, and therefore doesn't feel the need to hold the language on such a tight rein. This is a shame, because the premise of the novel is interesting and the Indian segments are provocative.

Steve Cooper is an air pilot with no apparent personality; his wife Hilary, we are constantly reminded, is very pretty, but because her character is only very hazily sketched out, it is baffling to understand why, halfway through the novel, she changes from being a poisonous snob with racist tendencies into a loving, accepting, social visionary; there is no narratorial explanation for the transformation; it just conveniently holds the plot together. Likewise, after Zarina has been given a job as an ayah to the Coopers' son, Clive, all mention of Ismail evaporates despite the fact that the two families live under one roof. In

contrast, when it comes to the insignificant points, McMahon never tires of detail. We are even informed (for no discernible reason), of the speed at which a child drinks a glass of lime cordial; this is lazy, unimaginative story telling.

At the core of the novel is Steve's decision to adopt Azam Aziz and treat him as if he were his own son, in order to give him a better chance in life. The family behaves rather peculiarly -- at first treating their servants disgracefully, before taking pity and showering affection upon the baby (while continuing to treat his parents disgracefully) -- but the extraordinary part comes when they decide to emigrate to Australia, taking Azam with them, without initially consulting his parents. Oddly, none of the wider ethical arguments about removing a child from his parents to take him to a foreign country, or even the socio-historical reasons for treating servants in a different manner to

one's friends, are even raised, let alone explored. None of the characters is developed, and instead, McMahon drip-feeds us banal details and laborious, clichéd jokes. When the family finally reach Melbourne, one would be forgiven for thinking that they had been living on the moon all their lives, not contemporary Kolkata. Surely they would have heard of the concept of credit cards and ATM machines even if they had never seen them?

However, this is McMahon's first novel and certain passages in the earlier parts of the novel indicate that he has talent but the plot design and the language, like slack violin strings, need tightening before they will really sing.

Isobel Shirlaw lives in Dhaka and is a free-lance editor and reviewer.

Kali O Kolom: Reinforcing a commitment to culture

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Kali O Kolom: Chothurto Protishtha Barshiki Shongkhyia, Falgun 1413

There is much that will enthuse readers of this fourth anniversary issue of *Kali O Kolom*. For starters, there is the detailed write-up on the Iranian Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi. Operating under a regime repressive in certain ways, Ebadi's courage is what comes through in this article.

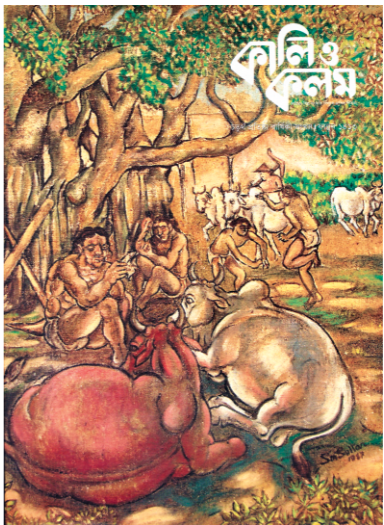
And then, one moves on to the contents that have traditionally been symbolic of arts and culture in *Kali O Kolom* since it first appeared four years ago. The heritage Bangladeshis are privy to is highlighted by the poet Abul Hossain in his reflections on the 1947 Partition and its aftermath. Hossain's agony stands apart from that of others in that he speaks of the intellectual suffering he has gone through. The shift from Calcutta to Dhaka was a leap into the unknown, to a new dream called Pakistan. Yet disillusion quickly set in, however, forcing history to chart a new course for Bengali Muslims. Hossain regrets the lost opportunities for the creation of a free Bengal, first in 1946 when the Cabinet Mission put its ABC cards on the table, and a year later when Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy briefly, perhaps flippantly, floated the idea of an independent Bengal as distinct from the states of India and Pakistan. Hossain celebrates the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 assuming in the process that the Bengali triumph over Pakistan was a vindication of the righteousness of the earlier Muslim Bengali cause. You may not agree with him, but you can feel the pathos in Hossain's ruminations.

Ramendu Majumdar's tribute to Afia Begum opens a small window to the liberal values capable of illuminating the lives of women in an era not much

noted for modernity. Afia, mother of fourteen children, reared them in line with the demands expected of them in subsequent times. When her illustrious son Munier Chowdhury--siblings include Kabir Chowdhury and Ferdousi Majumdar--was abducted by the al-Badr goon squad in December 1971, she was preparing his meal. She was, as long as she lived, never able to forget the child she loved for his intellect and humour. In reading the essay you read of the enlightened sections of Bengali society that defined culture here in the early years of the last century. Mafidul Haq also pays the lately departed Waheedul Haque a deserved tribute in his eloquent write-up, '*Tumi Kemon Kore*'. The remembrances here are fundamentally a journey back into the 1960s, when the writer first made his acquaintance with the man who in death has unquestionably turned into an icon.

The canvas then expands and what explodes before you is a rich collection of fiction (Purabi Basu, Hamid Kaiser, Proshonto Midra and many more) in this special issue of the journal. Nasreen Jahan's short story '*Khela*' introduces a new, almost post-modernistic dimension to the genre of Bangla fiction. Adultery mutually agreed upon is a topic you can mull over.

This Falgun 1413 issue of *Kali O Kolom* is an injection of new substance to the quality the journal has sought to maintain over the years. Short stories, poems and remembrances apart, there are the political and



social essays which make for good reading. Swapan Majumdar's revealing piece on Abu Sayeed Ayub will enthrall admirers of the man whose hands-on involvement in the promotion of aesthetics remains legendary. Shamsuzzaman Khan's evocation of tradition in '*Bangali Mussulman Shomaje Utshab O Tar Bhorton*' is arresting. And do not forget to glean through Rafiqun Nabi's '*Modhyoshottorer Greek Obhiggota Ebong Aami*'.

Kali O Kolom this time around and as always reinforces a commitment to culture, on the part of the contributors to this issue as well as those who are enlightened by them. That is saying quite a good deal.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

THE DAILY STAR SHORT STORY CONTEST

The Daily Star literature page invites short stories from all its readers, from here and abroad. The winning entry will be published and awarded a prize of Taka 5000. The story must not exceed 2000-2500 words and should be printed/typed. Multiple entries by the same person are not permitted. While the story can be written in any genre they must be set in Bangladesh and have Bangladeshi characters. Ideally, the submission should also be interesting at the level of language. The last date for entries is APRIL 10, 2007.

All entries must be sent to The Literary Editor, The Daily Star, 19 Karwan Bazar, Dhaka - 1215. Email entries should be sent to starliterature@thedailystar.net.